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C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000081

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OSD-ISA FOR ASD VERSHBOW AND DASD HUDDLESTON,
NEA FOR PDAS SCHLICHER, DAS SANDERSON, NEA/MAG, AND NEA/RA
PM FOR PDAS COUNTRYMAN
NSC STAFF FOR NORTH AFRICA DIRECTOR AGUIRRE
AFRICOM FOR AMBASSADOR HOLMES AND MG SHERLOCK
JOINT STAFF J5 FOR COL SALCEDO
FROM THE AMBASSADOR

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/02/2020

TAGS: [MARR](#) [PREL](#) [TS](#)

SUBJECT: TUNISIA: WE NEED TO PROCEED WITH THE APRIL 27-29
JOINT MILITARY COMMISSION AS PLANNED

REF: A. TUNIS 34 (NOTAL)
[1](#)B. TUNIS 26 (NOTAL)

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d).

Summary and Action Request

[1](#)1. (C) OSD should proceed with its initial plan to host the
25th Annual Joint Military Commission (JMC) with Tunisia
April 27-29 in Washington, D.C. The alternative - cancelling
or 'postponing' the JMC - is likely to damage relations with
the Government of Tunisia at a time it has signaled it wants
to turn a new page in bilateral relations. I am meeting with
the Defense Minister on February 8 and would like to present
him with a formal invitation letter to the JMC at that time.
End summary and action request.

Tunisians Aware of Original Invitation

[1](#)2. (SBU) The Tunisians were informed about the dates for
the JMC on January 13 when the Senior Defense Official
(SDO) received the signed invitation from OSD-ISA for
then-Minister of Defense Kamel Morjane. However, it was
not delivered because on January 14 the GOT announced a
cabinet change which moved Morjane to the Foreign Ministry
and Ridha Griira into the MOD position. We then requested
an updated letter from OSD-ISA for the new minister. The
MOD is now waiting for the invitation and a continued delay
will be seen as an affront to the new minister. Furthermore,
after OSD agreed to hold the JMC in April, the Governor of
Wyoming agreed to invite Griira for a visit on April 30 as
part of the State Partnership Program (SPP) Wyoming has with
Tunisia. This would be the most senior visit by either side
since the SPP began in 2004.

Improving Relations

[1](#)3. (C) After a low point beginning in the summer of 2008 and
lasting until after the elections last fall, recent
developments have provided signs that the GOT is acting to

improve bilateral atmospherics with the U.S., suggesting an opportunity exists to move relations forward with the GOT. As discussed reftels, the January 14 cabinet shuffle, particularly the move of the pro-West Morjane to the MFA, likely reflects the GOT's desire to improve its image and relations with the U.S. and other Western powers.

¶4. (C/NF) Military cooperation is on the upswing. After months of requests, beginning in December the GOT agreed to a series of visits; enthusiastically participated in a U.S.-Tunisian Intelligence Analyst Seminar and Exchange focused on regional terrorism; agreed to AFRICOM's request to move the Annual Planning Conference (the second most important bilateral event after the JMC) to March from its previous July dates; indicated its intention to participate in the Directors of Military Intelligence Conference as well as a counterpart visit hosted by the AFRICOM Director of Intelligence and Knowledge Development; recently expressed appreciation for U.S. support and programs in Mali, Niger, and Mauritania focused on combating AQIM; indicated its desire for greater U.S. assistance and cooperation in border security and intelligence sharing; and have generally begun responding positively and in a timely manner to requests on matters dealing with bilateral exercises, seminars, exchanges and execution of military-to-military events. We need to capitalize on this momentum by proceeding with the JMC as originally scheduled.

Grira's Influence

¶5. (C/NF) While the Tunisian decision-making process can be murky, we believe that Grira's previous position as Minister of State Properties and Real Estate indicates that he has President Ben Ali's full confidence. In his previous capacity, Grira would have had access to sensitive information about the finances and holdings of both Ben Ali's and the First Lady's families, who have benefitted from acquisitions of government and other lands. Such information is closely guarded, and Grira's appointment as Defense Minister suggests he remains influential and in favor with the highest levels of the GOT. Holding the JMC as scheduled, followed by the State Partnership visit to Wyoming, provides the U.S. the opportunity to influence the new Defense Minister's objectives and perceptions of the value of the U.S.-Tunisian relationship at the beginning of his tenure.

Tunisian Objectives

¶6. (C) The GOT will not officially begin preparing for the JMC until it receives an invitation from the Department of Defense. At the colonel level, Tunisian officials have told us that Grira will reiterate Tunisia's commitment to relations with the United States, as evidenced by the fact that this is the only one of its 12 bilateral discussions attended personally by the Defense Minister, and explain that the GOT has opted to focus its limited resources on developing its social programs, which it believes is the best way to combat extremism. Grira will discuss Tunisia's perspectives on regional issues, such as the threat from the Trans-Sahel region. During our joint preparation

for the JMC, we will ask that both sides present a strategic brief that addresses the regional challenges and the best way to address these challenges, with a focus on building on the recent momentum the Tunisians have shown vis--vis bilateral military cooperation.

U.S. Objectives

¶17. (C/NF) The JMC, held at the end of April as originally scheduled, will give the U.S. its best opportunity to develop a strong and productive relationship with the new Defense Minister from the outset of his tenure. We will want to emphasize to Griira that while we value our relationship with Tunisia, shrinking resources will be prioritized for those countries that are willing to work with the U.S., particularly in regional security efforts such as the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Program (TSCTP) and NATO's Operation Active Endeavor. Tunisia's Foreign Military Financing (FMF) will drop from \$15 million in FY-2010 to \$4.9 million in FY-2011. I fully support this reduction, and it is important that the GOT - and Griira in particular - clearly understand what has led to reduced FMF levels. At the same time, by pointing to the large IMET budget and the robust mil-mil program, which will be discussed during the March 17-18

Annual Planning Conference (APC), we will clearly express our desire to continue working with the Tunisian military, the sole apolitical security force in Tunisia. We will also be able to point to potentially increased military intelligence cooperation, to include training in the desert regions of

Tunisia
focused on integration of intelligence collection assets provided under the 1206 and Peacekeeping Operations (PKO) programs, as a security multiplier.

Funding

¶18. (SBU) The Ministry of Defense has said that while it would appreciate any financial assistance the U.S. could provide for its participation in the JMC, it is willing to fully fund its own participation. However, our counterparts in the MOD have emphasized that they cannot request funding until an official invitation to attend this event is received.

Conclusion

¶19. (C) While reading the true intention of the GOT is always difficult, recent indicators such as the Cabinet shuffle, the lack of a strong reaction to the Secretary of State's recent criticism of Tunisia's record on Internet freedom, and agreements to hold meetings which had been on hold for months indicate a desire by the GOT to renew and improve ties with the U.S. Retracting the invitation to the April 27-29 JMC will be seen by the new Minister as both a personal and political affront, will reverse our efforts to repair this relationship, and will likely set back progress for years. The JMC is a golden opportunity to make a positive impression on the Defense Minister and take advantage of the current environment to improve relations and strengthen not just our mil-mil relations with Tunisia, but also our broader bilateral relationship.

¶10. (C) I therefore request that OSD proceed with the JMC as

originally planned, and request (by COB Friday, February 5) a formal invitation letter to deliver to the Minister of Defense on Monday morning, February 8.

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